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SUBJECT: KING FAROUK: NOSTALGIA FOR THE PAST OR LOATHING FOR THE PRESENT?

¶1. (U) Summary: Rare is the iftar or sohour in Cairo these days where the topic does not quickly turn to the Ramadan soap opera series about King Farouk, which presents a view of Egypt's last monarch radically at odds with the image perpetrated by the official media and textbooks over the past 55 years since his overthrow. Long reviled and mocked in popular Egyptian lore as a fat puppet of the British with sick personal habits, the Farouk of this immensely popular serial makes an astonishing come-back. He comes across as a sympathetic even attractive character who loves Egypt and struggles manfully against tragic circumstances. What is most surprising is the reaction by Egyptians of all political and social backgrounds to the Saudi-financed production. Rather than dismissing it as royalist revisionism, Egyptians are making their children watch the series so that they "see the real picture of King Farouk," rather than what the opposition Ad Dustour daily, which devoted an entire issue to the series, calls "the greatest distortion in modern Egyptian History." End summary.

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VINDICATING THE KING AND HIS TIMES  
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¶2. (U) Based on 10 years of research by Egyptian author Lamees Gaber with assistance from local historians, the Farouk of this series is far from the womanizing drunkard in the Nasserite narrative. Plunged upon his father's death in 1936 into court politics, the young King struggled with the complex emotions of his overbearing mother and her lover, the chamberlain, and a political maze in which he was torn between Wafdist patriots, British quislings and Nazi sympathizers. The handsome young prince tries to do the right thing, showing compassion and some degree of political skill. If he falters or succumbs to the wiles of the older politicians who manipulate him, he never betrays his love for Egypt's people, or resorts to ruthless measures.

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INVIDIOUS COMPARISONS  
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¶3. (SBU) Infallibly, as they extol the series, Egyptians compare the days of the King with the present - unfavorably. "The King did not torture prisoners, imprison journalists or beat demonstrators," claims opposition daily Ad Duster. "We had a real parliament then with real political parties," commented a senior judicial official. Indeed, according to press commentaries, the cabinet and the Egyptian parliament exercised far greater powers than they do today, and King Farouk was beholden to them. The serial shows him struggling to persuade the Wafdist leader Mustafa an-Nahas to form a government and walking a fine line between the various political factions, just to avoid being deposed.

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EGYPTIAN TV: FAROUK NOT FIT FOR PRIME TIME  
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14. (U) Not surprisingly, the leadership of state-run Egyptian TV was less than excited by the Farouk story. When approached by the writer, they rejected the Ramadan serial. Though they did not prevent Saudi-owned Middle Eastern Broadcasting Corporation from filming most of the footage in the state-owned and financially troubled Media City outside of Cairo, they refused to allow MBC to shoot in any of the government-owned palaces. They also declined to air the series on any of the government-owned channels - not a showstopper for many Egyptians, however, who receive MBC through subscriptions or illegal hookups through dishes owned by local entrepreneurs.

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A KINDER, GENTLER ERA  
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15. (SBU) The idea that Egypt somehow took a wrong turn when it ousted Farouk is a seductive one for many commentators. While few would bring back the monarchy, many argue that the appeal among Egyptians of this Saudi-made TV show whose main actor and director are Syrians, lies in the nostalgia for what people see as a ruling elite that appreciated glamour and refinement typified by elegant palaces and monumental public buildings like Cairo University. These qualities, according to many Egyptians, are glaringly absent in the commercialized complexes of sprawling villas and megamalls favored by the rich and powerful of today. Nor, as they see it, did Egypt's head of state rule the political institutions with the unchecked authority that President Mubarak commands. When King Farouk wanted to refurbish the royal yacht or transfer a problematic ambassador, he had to cajole the Parliament and horse-trade with his Ministers - an exercise unthinkable in today's executive branch. "We had real politics in those days," commented one of our contacts.

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